

The Battle of New Orleans



The war of 1812 was taking its toll on the United States and President James Madison. The U.S. treasury was nearly bankrupt but the President needed additional troops to continuing fighting the war but men were not enlisting in the military. Drafting men, that is requiring men by law to serve in the military if they were selected, was not an option because the New England states threatened to secede from the United States if there was a draft. President Madison wanted an army of sixty thousand but he could only muster thirty thousand. The feeling in the country is that an attack on New Orleans would result in a defeat for the United States.

New Orleans is a thousand miles from Washington, D.C. and any messages between the federal government and military leaders in New

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Orleans took ten days to arrive by messengers traveling on horseback. In late 1814 the British had fifty large warships, over ten thousand soldiers and about one thousand cannons on wheels ready to attack New Orleans.

On December 1, 1814 American General Andrew Jackson, whose nickname was Old Hickory, arrived in New Orleans and set about strengthening defenses and identifying strategic locations that needed to be defended. To bolster his formal army of soldiers, General Jackson recruited the Louisiana militia, local frontiersmen of both French and Spanish heritage, local Choctaw Indians, African Americans and Creoles. Creoles were Louisiana natives with a mixed American, Spanish and French background. General Jackson even accepted the assistance of pirates who were under the command of Jean Laffite. On December 23, twenty-five hundred volunteers from Tennessee arrived. The British called this oddball army "dirty shirts."

The British fleet arrived and faced the huge task of getting their men and supplies to shore in the swampy area around New Orleans. The British had to row everything to shore. British General John Keane assembled two thousand men and supplies on shore and camped just seven miles from the city of New Orleans.

Jackson ordered his men to attack the camp during the night gaining a psychological victory over the British by a surprise attack. On Christmas Day, 1814 both armies moved into place for battle. The first attack occurred on January 1, 1815 when the British fired their cannons on the American defenses and American cannon returned fire. After a three-hour battle the British retreated.

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On January 8 more British troops had arrived at the battleground and the commanding general attacked the American defenses. But British General Pakenham used the traditional method of fighting that had successfully defeated Napoleon in France just a short while before. The British troops marched toward their enemy in straight column ranks, firing muskets when they approached the enemy. Jackson's army of sharpshooters were perched high on defended walls and were able to easily shoot the advancing British soldiers who were marching across open terrain. This was a complete victory for the American troops.

On February 4, 1815 a messenger arrived by ship from Europe with the news that American and British negotiators had signed a peace treaty in Ghent, Belgium on December 24, 1814. The War of 1812 was over.

Questions:

1. Why was drafting soldiers not an option for the United States?
2. During the War of 1812, how long would it take for a message from Washington D.C. to reach New Orleans?
3. Other than regular soldiers, who did Andrew Jackson use to bolster the ranks of his army?
4. What did the British call Jackson's ragtag army?
5. How did Jackson gain a psychological advantage over the British?
6. Why do you think that the traditional British method of fighting was not successful against Jackson's men?